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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAGHDAD 000979

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SUBJECT: ISCI SEEKS TO REFINE IMAGE, TOYS WITH MORE DRASTIC ACTION

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Classified By: PMIN Robert Ford for reason 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) is seeking to refine its public message away from religious themes and regionalism to regain lost political ground. Our recent meetings with ISCI officials indicate the party will continue to support good ties with the U.S. and remain in coalition with the Maliki government. For apparently tactical reasons, however, ISCI is also employing more drastic action to contrast itself with its Shia competitors, such as selective lashing out at the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement (SA) and (openly if insincerely) considering Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki's ouster through a vote of no confidence. ISCI would likely back away from these actions if brought into some provincial governments or a renewed Shia alliance with Da'wa. The end result of this internal Shia Islamist churning is that for the immediate future at least, Prime Minister Maliki's position in power is safer. End summary.

ISCI Refining Its Image

¶2. (C) The Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI) has undergone an internal review after its second place showing in the January 31 provincial elections. According to ISCI officials and advisors, the group seeks to refine its message but will not abandon its core agenda of greater governmental power-sharing, respect for the constitution, and closer ties with the United States. Raja al-Khalili, an advisor to Vice President Adil Abd al-Mahdi, told Poloff on March 31 one of ISCI's agreed-upon reforms is to tone down its overtly religious image and instead focus on the "real" issues impacting the Iraqi people such as services and the economy. Muhammad Ali al-Hakim, a Ministry of Foreign Affairs official and another Abd al-Mahdi advisor, told Poloffs that ISCI has lost popularity because it was perceived as favoring too much Kurdish autonomy. He said ISCI would not abandon its "strategic alliance" with the Kurds but would set aside its call for a nine-governorate southern region because such calls are perceived by Iraqi Arabs as too similar to Kurdish visions of the Iraqi state. Muhammad al-Hakim also said ISCI should tell the Kurds to refrain from provocative gestures or statements that could spark an anti-Kurdish backlash.

Will Not Abandon Maliki or the U.S.

¶3. (C) Meanwhile, ISCI officials say they will continue to push for national government power-sharing to constrain what they see as an overly assertive prime minister. ISCI deputy chairman Ammar al-Hakim hinted to PMIN in March that there were no plans to oust PM Maliki through a vote of no-confidence but if the Prime Minister deviates from the constitution "we will give him a map" (i.e. encourage him to alter course). Later in March, ISCI joined with the Kurds and the Sunni Iraq Islamic Party (IIP) in parliament to transfer some money away from the Prime Minister's Office (ref A). ISCI/Badr MP Tahsin al-Azawi told Poloffs that this move was

designed to defund "illegal" bodies under the PMO that Maliki has unfairly used to expand his political popularity.

14. (C) ISCI officials across the board have told us they wish for a continued partnership with the United States. Tahsin asked for the U.S. to provide Iraq a "protective wall" as its institutions develop. Khalili said VP Abd al-Mahdi is ready to work with the U.S. to help ease Arab-Kurd tensions. Vice President Abdel Mehdi told PMIN April 6 that the U.S. role was critical in helping build institutions in Iraq and also Qwas critical in helping build institutions in Iraq and also in helping defuse Arab-Kurd tensions.

ISCI Might Take Drastic Action If Pushed

15. (C) ISCI officials, however, are experimenting with more drastic action to regain lost political ground, such as beginning to challenge the U.S.-Iraq Security Agreement (SA) and aggressively undercutting Maliki. Muwafuq Rubai, PM Maliki's National Security Advisor, on March 24 told a Coalition official that ISCI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim had asked him for the release of Abd al-Aziz Ismail al-Tamimi, an ISCI official in Diyala who was detained on March 22 by U.S. forces. Badr leader Hadi al-Amiri and ISCI MP and Shia cleric Jalal al-Din al-Saghir since Tamimi's arrest have publicly threatened to urge their followers to reject the SA through a referendum because the arrest "undermines Iraq's sovereignty" and violates the SA. (Note. Tamimi in early April was handed over to the Iraqi government and released. Article 22(2) of the SA states: "In the event the United States Forces detain or arrest persons as authorized by this Agreement or Iraqi law, such persons must be handed over to competent Iraqi

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authorities within 24 hours from the time of their detention or arrest." End note.) Because Maliki has associated himself with the SA, ISCI might judge these attacks on U.S. behavior as a handy tactic to undercut Maliki.

Comment

16. (C) Among parliamentarians, talk of a vote of no confidence against Maliki has diminished. However, PMIN learned from Foreign Minister Hoshyar Zebari that when PM Maliki made an unscheduled stopover in Iran on his way back from Australia, Maliki met with Iranian officials who warned him that his ISCI, Kurd and IIP rivals in parliament want him out. These Iranian officials, according to Zebari, told Maliki that both President Jalal Talabani and VP Adil Abd al-Mahdi when they visited Tehran in late February sought Tehran's opinion about a vote of no confidence. If ISCI officials judge Maliki will unfairly use his office to suppress votes for his rivals -- as they tell us Maliki did during provincial election -- their desire for a vote of no confidence would increase.

17. (C) At present, ISCI is unlikely to wholly rescind its support for the SA or forcefully push for Maliki's ouster because those ISCI officials who are reluctant to damage their relationship with the U.S. (e.g. the Hakims and Abd al-Mahdi) and the Kurds probably have found common ground with those ISCI members who want to work with Maliki (e.g. Humam Hamoudi and Sheikh Taqi al-Mawla), and are winning out over ISCI officials advocating a harder line (e.g. Saghir and Amiri). ISCI might reach for more drastic action if it becomes increasingly isolated by, for example, being denied leadership positions in provincial governments or facing a cohesive Maliki-Sadrism partnership. ISCI-Da'wa rapprochement before national elections, especially under the guise of a renewed Shia alliance, would likely dissuade ISCI from changing its cooperative course with the added benefit of offering Maliki a partner able to relate to the Kurds. We are hearing from Maliki confidantes, such as Hussain

al-Sanayd on April 8, that there will be provinces where, in fact, ISCI and Da'wa do form provincial alliances. Thus, the end result of this Shia Islamist churning is that Maliki's immediate position in power seems safer.

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